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Philosophy of My Faith

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Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed. — John: 20–29

In the following I will do something unusual for a philosopher, or at least unusual for a philosopher of the 21st century. Instead of talking about fideism, hinge commitments, or Wittgenstein, instead of pitching one philosophical argument against another, I will start with a personal story about my own religious belief. Then, I will explore what this story brings to the philosophical debate.

Speaking to God

I do not remember when I started praying to God, but I recall the prayers were an important part of my childhood. Every night, after my mother and father kissed me good night, I prayed. I remember the prayers very well. I would start with “My God, my dear God” and then pray for my parents. I prayed for them to be well and happy. I also prayed for the best friend, that she was okay and we would never be apart. I prayed for little things too and would say silently: “My God, if it’s not a big deal, please, please, may we have a sunny day tomorrow so that we can all go to the park.” To me, God’s presence was immediate, real, and unquestionable. Speaking to him was a must—as was watching cartoons at 7:15 pm.

I don’t remember where and when I heard about God. I grew up in socialist Yugoslavia. My mother and father were atheists, or at least my mother was an atheist in front of my father. Much later I learned that she insisted on having me baptized in the Orthodox Church. My father let her do it but refused to be present. Still, in our household, there was no talk about God. We did not have the Bible on our bookshelves.

Yet the first story I heard about human origins was the story of Adam and Eve. One day, my friend and I were trying to figure out where we all came from. I remember tracing the causal chain: “Our parents had us, their parents had them, and grandparents had parents too ... but who was at the beginning? How did the first humans come to be?” Even though God was already with me every night, I never connected the two. So my friend and I decided to ask her father to help us out. He said, “God created Adam and Eve and there was the apple, and the Fall, etc.” We were not happy with the story, so we checked with my father. My father said: “Nonsense! Human beings evolved from the monkeys because they worked hard with their hands.” We were not happy with this either and decided to drop the question for the time being.

I do not think I entered any church before I was in primary school. The cross I must have seen in places signified nothing to me. I vaguely remember that I watched a movie in which a man was crucified; especially the strong impression it made on me and that I asked my father about him. My dad said: “Jesus was a good man. He said that all people were equal in front of God. But there is no God. Still, he was right, and they crucified him for it.” The most curious thing was that none of this interfered with my nightly prayers. No matter how many times my father, whom I trusted and loved the most, said there was no God when he noticed my curiosity, his words ceased to matter when I closed my eyes in the evening, when it was time for prayer.

Growing Up Secular

In the background of my prayers, a completely secular childhood unfolded. There was no Christmas, but there were New Year's Eves. There was no Easter, but there was the 1st of May. There were no Biblical stories, but there were folk tales. By the time I was a teenager, I had already found out many things on my own, read about Jesus' sacrifice and his resurrection, and started going to church and lighting candles. My prayers broadened to include other people, living and dead, those who were alone and had nobody to pray for them. I had already read Dostoevsky. But I admit I felt awkward in church; I was always worried that I did not know how real believers did things, how to pray properly. My father and I frequently took long walks, even when I was a rebellious teen, and I would sometimes drop by the church for a quick word with God. My father would stop at the entrance and say, "Right, right, do your own thing there. It's a nice fantasy after all."

During my studies and especially graduate school, the immediacy of God's presence disappeared. The sense that he was there like a cornerstone vanished. In my late twenties and early thirties, I was a young woman with no faith. I never ventured to state it or go around prophesying there was no God, but evening prayers were a thing of the past. There was nobody there to talk to any more. My idiosyncratic and awkward church going and candle lighting stopped. At the time, I did not think much about it, never reflected on it, as I was busy with my doctorate and later with a baby and a new job.

My father passed away, as much of an atheist as he had ever been, whispering to my mother in his last moments, "Please, please, M., do not let me go." Four years later, my mother followed him. Her last words, as I was told, were: "Tell my Lilliana and little K. that I love them." After a long flight across the Atlantic with neither parent left to greet me, I had a devastating experience, the exact opposite of the mystical. The mortician led me to the morgue, as I had to identify my mother. "It's the regular procedure," he explained. As I stood there, he offered me a chair, saying, "Have a seat, talk to her, it's your mother." And I couldn't. What I saw was that she was not there. I felt there was nothing beyond, that my mother was nowhere, there was no God, I would not be reunited with him, that nobody would—this is all there is. It took me years to recover. In fact, I have to confess that I have never recovered fully.

But I did recover smithereens of my shattered faith. It seemed I needed to lose it all in order to revive bits of it. These days I do pray. I pray as I did when I was a teenager: I pray to God for the living and dead, and all the people who have nobody to pray for them. I pray to God to give happiness and health to those still among us, to grant rest to the dead, and I ask him to forgive us all our sins. That is more or less how I say it in my head before I kiss the candle, light it, and cross myself. The list of the dead I mention by name grows longer every year. And here and there in rare moments when I do not expect it, I feel the immediacy of God's presence the way I did when I was a child. I feel his mercy and do not question it.

But these days, I am also a philosopher. I am not sure if studying philosophy slowly eroded my faith or not. I still went to church more or less regularly during my undergraduate years—that much is true. Philosophical arguments seemed separated from my relationship with God. Proofs of God's existence have always left me unmoved, and Nietzschean pronouncements that God is dead amused me. Philosophical topics that stirred my passion

during graduate school were far from theological debates and dealt mostly with human psychology: the magic we do when we speak, think, love, hurt, sympathize.

On the Philosophy of Religion

A few years ago, Slavisa Kostic and I wrote a paper on Wittgenstein's (quasi)-fideism (2017). This was the first time I got close to philosophy of religion. Now, I feel ready to revisit some of the ideas we developed there through the prism of my personal experience.

What is the nature of religious belief? What are the grounds on which our faith, if we have it, rests? Is it the case, as Hume used to think, that our religious beliefs are of the same kind as any other empirical beliefs, and since we cannot find legitimate empirical evidence for them, the best thing to do is to discard them as irrational and simply be agnostics, if not full atheists? "The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery," Hume says, "Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject" (Hume 15.13).

Or does religious faith have its own "logic"? Is it a form of life so to speak, and do only those who have it, who participate in the religious practices of their community, know what religious concepts mean and how to assess them? Malcolm (2000; 2002) and Phillips (1993) attribute this view to Wittgenstein, calling his position "fideism." Whether they are correct is another matter, and I will leave that to Wittgensteinians to determine. The immediate worry arising from this stance is that if science, religion, and other areas of human endeavour are independent, have their own "logic", and can be understood only from within, they all necessarily have their own "truths". This kind of compartmentalization of our human world and the resulting relativism do not sit well with our intuitions.

But we can perhaps avoid the charge of relativism and Humean agnosticism if we give up the claim that religious beliefs have epistemological value, if we treat religious belief as a way of life, a stance or attitude that gives our life guidance, direction, purpose, and meaning, but not as a doctrine that explains how the world came to be, i.e., as a theory that relies on metaphysical baggage.

If religious faith is not about predicating and explaining the world and events in it, does this mean it has no "epistemological" value at all? Does this mean that faith, while guiding our lives, is not and cannot be strictly speaking "true"? This sounds very strange to anyone who believes in God; religious people say that God exists, that they know it, and that this is indeed true. This brings us back to Hume's worry. How can religious people claim to know that there is God if there is no empirical evidence? If, in return, we make the criterion for "knowing that God exists" internal and confine it to those who share the belief, i.e. separate it from empirical knowledge, we embrace relativism and, as we have seen, this is a dead end.

The question is the following: Can we save the regulative function of religious faith (the role it plays in our lives, the meaning and moral guidance it gives us as a lived faith) but, at the same time, save its truth (epistemological value) without relativizing it? A solution that Kostic and I argue for in our paper is found in Prichard's (2012a; 2012b) interpretation of

Wittgenstein (regardless of whether Wittgenstein himself would subscribe to it). Here is the idea in a nutshell: Unlike what Hume thought about the special rational status of empirical beliefs, all our beliefs, including the empirical ones, rely on certain basic hinge commitments that do not require further justification or additional empirical evidence. If we ask for further justification of such hinge commitments, we end up with evidence that is not more certain.

A famous example (G. E. Moore's in original) of one such hinge commitment appears in Wittgenstein's later manuscript *On Certainty*: "My having two hands" Wittgenstein says "is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it" (Wittgenstein 1969 §250, 33e). Many beliefs beside this one could be candidates for basic hinge commitments. In order for us to argue whether a mutual friend is from Toronto or Vancouver originally, we need to presuppose many things: that there are cities and countries, that there is the world to be born into, and that it was not created three minutes ago etc. "The game of doubting itself presupposes some certainty," as Wittgenstein correctly notes (Wittgenstein 1969, §115, 18e).

For now, I'll let other philosophers separate hinge from derivative beliefs. Those interested can check out my paper with Kostic. The most important aspect of the concept of hinge commitments is that it gives us a way to think about our religious beliefs. Since our empirical beliefs need to rest on the grounds that cannot be (empirically) supported further, our faith rests on such grounds that cannot be proclaimed irrational after all. This insight was advanced by J. H. Newman in his *Grammar of Assent* (1870) and had a profound impact on Wittgenstein when he was writing *On Certainty*.

Is Religious Belief a Hinge Commitment?

Still the question remains: Can we treat religious belief as a hinge commitment and, if so, how exactly? After all, religious belief is not like belief in having two hands, nor is it similar to the belief that the earth was not created yesterday. In our paper, Kostic and I propose that religious belief is similar to our social cognition, or in other words, the way we know that other people have feelings, thoughts, desires, intentions, i.e., that they have a rich psychological life on their own. Unlike some theories of social cognition that argue such knowledge of others is theoretical and relies on cognitively advanced techniques (inference, theory, and the like), we say children develop such knowledge before they learn language, and this knowledge is not propositional. Even in the first year of life, children form the stance or the attitude that other people are persons with intentions of their own. Developmental psychology gives us the timeline of the development of this prelinguistic attitude toward others: from social orienting (the tendency of a child to look at the person not objects), emotional recognition (acknowledgment of different facial expressions), social referencing (checking the caregiver's emotional expression in novel situations to determine if the situation is dangerous or not), to joint attention (the ability to focus together with a caregiver on a particular object). Once this attitude is in place, when language kicks in, children, like adults, can start to question if other people really feel what they say they do, or believe what they claim.

The baseline hinge commitment that other people have a mental life of their own provides the basis for such speculations. When we learn language we can articulate our doubts about

other people's feelings and thoughts, before this we develop "intuitive" knowledge of others. If we now go back to the nature of religious belief, it seems we might be better off if we consider it to be more of a stance/attitude than a regular (pseudo)empirical belief.

Of course, some may say that faith in God, unlike our social cognition, is far from universal. Yet universality breaks down even in the case of basic perceptual beliefs (see e.g. Radenovic 2010), let alone social cognition (for the review see Radenovic 2015). As Newman says, "Light is a quality of matter, as truth is of Christianity; but light is not recognized by the blind, and there are those who cannot recognize truth, from the fault, not of truth, but of themselves" (Newman, 331)

The brief sketch of my personal story of faith is out in the open now, and so are some philosophical arguments about the nature of faith. I will try to put them together and see how they fit.

Changing Commitments

The way I believed in God as a little girl was certainly not based on any inference, nor did it need evidence of any sort. I do not know how I learned about God. I may have heard about God, I may have heard that people pray to God, but that lies beyond my memory. All I know is that I did believe. Prayer is one of my first memories and, in my mind, God's existence was as secure as the existence of my parents, my friend and her parents. My father's claims that there was no God could not touch me—much like philosophical doubts about other people's minds never feel real. We can entertain such arguments in our heads, but as soon as a friend shows up, or we simply walk outside and find ourselves among other people, we know that others indeed have minds. The same thing happened with my father's arguments when I prayed. God felt real and was completely different from fairies or Santa Claus. Oddly enough, I did not believe in Santa. My realist parents did not allow that type of fantasy to flourish. Christ's sacrifice and resurrection were added to my basic belief later on. Whatever explains the relationship between my first, initial faith in God and the later Christianity that was built on it, it is clear that belief had a truth value (God was my reality) and a regulative value (I prayed to him), even though I did not participate in any religious practices of my community. My childhood was as secular as it was possible to be.

In the end, the immediacy and the certainty of God's existence evaporated, and I lost my hinge commitment for reasons unknown to me. The culprit might be the study of philosophy, my life among atheists, the lack of religious community, or all of these, for all I know. Newman notes, "It is more than probable that, in the event, from neglect, from the temptations of life, from bad companions, or from the urgency of secular occupations, the light of the soul will fade away and die out" (Newman, 97–98). Today I am thankful that, at least occasionally, God's presence returns to me at full strength, and in these fleeting moments, I feel blessed.

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